The recognition of alienation in capital as political action

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It can be said that the work with Marx's Capital is to recognize one's own subjectivity alienated in capital as the bearer of the overcoming of capital itself, and that is a revolutionary political action.

LG: *The subject of "Marx" is very controversial, and we have been concerned about why we should or should not study Marx? And in this sense, what would be the incentive for Economics students to study this author today?*

GC: First of all, I would say that the question baffles me, because for me it is the other way around: why *not* study Marx? It is difficult for me to find arguments not to study it in a degree like Economics. I think that the main problem with this degree is that it is only based on one of the several schools of thought that exist: neoclassical. And in addition, it is approached through manuals, which is degrading, because you do not read the original authors, and then you have a completely uncritical teaching.

Why not read Marx if there is a school of economic thought around his approach? Marx's critique is one of the approaches available to understand economic reality, so why is this author displaced from education in Economics? A university degree in Economics would have to offer all the positions that exist in the field so that each student can judge which is the most useful to understand economic phenomena.

In my case, when faced with this diversity of approaches, I found in Marx's the most powerful tool to answer the questions that motivated me and continue to motivate me: what characterizes today's society?, what am I in this society?, what to do in the face of reality? I ask myself this every day, I read Marx and I find answers and open paths to question myself about how social life works today and about what I am in that process.

IP: *Now, a question arises for us, especially regarding the differences that exist between contemporary capitalism and the one analyzed by Marx, so we would like to know your opinion on whether some analytical categories of Marxism have lost relevance or validity over time. In that same sense, do you consider it necessary to reread Marx's work with the intention of reconstructing it in a way that allows us to explain the transformations that capitalism has undergone?*

GC: I link this answer to the previous question. I said that I am interested in Marx because he helps me to answer the questions of what I am in the society I live in and how to act accordingly. Therefore, for me it is not a problem of knowing what society was like in 1867 (the date on which the first volume of Capital was published), if at that time what Marx was proposing served to solve the questions that his readers had, nor in principle, of knowing what transformations mediate between that time of society and ours. I am interested in whether Marx serves to answer me about what I have in front of me, today. Period. If, when I read Marx, I found that what is happening to me now is not useful in answering me, then I would dismiss it—just as I do when confronted with the neoclassicals, the sraffians, the Keynesians, and the post-Keynesians. If their developments present something that I do not find in reality, then they are of no use to me. This is a first issue.

But, in addition, following the approach of the Center for Research as Practical Criticism (CICP) I find that the exposition offered by Marx is particularly apt for these purposes. Because Marx does not begin *Capital* with a "concept" or a "theoretical construction" that claims to be "contrasted" with reality. "I do not start from concepts," Marx writes in some well-known reading notes that he made shortly before he died. On the contrary, as he says in some drafts, he starts "by taking a commodity in his hand and analyzing its determinations." And then, it places us readers in another perspective. It does not call us to compare the "theory" with the reality we face, but to grab a commodity in our own hands and analyze its determinations. If we find the same thing that Marx tells us to find, then we continue reading *Capital*, to see if the next thing that appears is also what we find when we look at the commodity we have in our hand. *Capital* serves us to the extent that it enhances our process of knowledge of current reality. If *Capital* were not there, we would have the same questions we have, but with the difference that it would start from scratch, almost as Marx himself began, to reach the answers we reach. In reality, this is true of any knowledge process: one always seeks to answer a question and always starts from the knowledge

achieved about it. But in Marx's case this critical appropriation of previous knowledge is, so to speak, directly promoted by his peculiar method of exposition.

Now, after going down this road, what I can say is that what Marx found in analyzing the commodity in the nineteenth century is the same as what I find in the analysis of the twenty-first century: the commodity is the simplest form taken by the alienated social relation that constitutes capital. And I continue reading and find the same determinations of the process of organization of social life that Marx found. Of course, I find the same with regard to the more general determinations of this process. The most concrete forms of these determinations cannot be the same as those faced by Marx and which, in fact, he does not expose in his work, any more than the singular determinations of my action can be the same as those of my contemporaries.

LG: *According to what you tell us about Marx's analytical framework, we are interested in knowing your opinion on what* it *can offer us in the face of the economic, financial, cultural and social crises that we are currently experiencing.*

GC: It is very complex to give an answer in two words to this question. First of all, Marx does not offer easy answers because every answer presupposes a development that implies not skipping over any of the determinations at stake, from the most general to the most specific. Even so, one could give an easy answer in the negative: when one reads neoclassical economics, it is manifest that its approach is powerless to account for crises, simply because it does not recognize their existence; crises do not enter into this theory of the economic behavior of individuals. While the school of thought that has worked the most on the theme of crises has been the one based on Marx's approach.

Now, if I may, I would be critical of the formulation of the question. Because rather than having an economic crisis, on the one hand, and a social crisis, on the other, I think that it is actually a single phenomenon. Because if one says that there is an economic "and" social crisis, it means that the economic is not social, that the economic is not a historically determined social relation. What would be the social that is not economic or the economic that is not social? Precisely one of Marx's great efforts throughout his life was to discuss the approaches that naturalize economic relations, for example, that of the classical political economy of Smith and Ricardo that naturalized the commodity, money and capital.

That said, I can try to move forward a bit, without going into too much detail, in responding about the crisis, based on what Marx contributes on the subject. First of all, it can be said that Marx is quite a pioneer in revealing the existence of economic cycles and in recognizing them as phenomena inherent to capitalism. Certainly, when Marx was writing, capitalism still had a short historical development, let's say it did not have many years of life. In turn, statistically there were not many records either. Therefore, cycles other than those of five or ten years could not be studied. However, just as we try to do from the CICP, based on what Marx achieved, it is possible to reconstruct an explanation of the longer cycles which are the ones that end in deeper crises like the one we are currently facing.

In this regard, the first thing I propose is the existence of two general determinations of crises. First, that which has to do with the movement of the general unity between consumption and production: as a product of the private character in which work is performed, capital produces commodities as if it itself did not set any limit to their consumption; then, inevitably, we fall into a crisis of overproduction of commodities. Second, that associated with the movement of the general rate of profit: in order to increase the production of surplus-value, capital needs to increase the productive forces of labour, which implies an increase in the constant share of capital over its variable part, in order to decrease, in this way, the rate of profit. However, these two determinations do not imply that there is a tendency to absolute overproduction or to a definitive fall in the rate of profit that puts an end to capitalism, as has been proposed several times. On the contrary, these two determinations have a cyclical character, we enter into a situation of overproduction and a fall in the rate of profit, from which one can only get out by revolutionizing the productive forces of labor, concentrating and centralizing capital even more, only to fall back on a larger scale into the same situation of overproduction and falling rate of profit. So far, broadly speaking, and with all due caveats, this is what Marx contributes to the matter.

Now, what can be said of the specificity of the current crisis? Once again it is necessary to go beyond Marx in search of the concrete forms of these general determinations: those that correspond to the world unity of capital accumulation, the international division of labor, the recent transformations in the materiality of labor processes, and national specificities, just to begin with.

But, in addition, and returning to the specificity of the question, the other thing we know from following Marx is that the economic crisis is carried out in a political and cultural crisis; because, indeed, it is not that there is economics on the one hand, and politics and culture on the other. In a famous passage of

his work, Marx refers to this unity between economy, politics and culture through the metaphor of the base and the superstructure, in which he indicates, as we read from the CICP, that political relations, cultural relations and forms of consciousness are the forms in which the economic base is realized. And this point, for me, is key, because it shows that our knowledge cannot stop at elucidating the economic content of the crisis, since it would be reducing the crisis to an abstraction. Consequently, in order to account for the current crisis, it is also necessary to advance in its political and cultural forms.

IP: *In your opinion, does it make sense to talk once again about the construction of a different society and bring concepts such as socialism into the discussion? If your answer is yes, who do you think could be the social actors that promote this transformation in capitalist social relations?*

GC: Again, the question is quite complex and also presupposes the deployment of a whole set of determinations that cannot be made here. But I dare to summarize the following. First of all, what one finds when one looks at the more general manifestations of capitalism is that it is not the most powerful mode of production for developing the productive forces of social labor. This is expressed, among other things, in the existence of the entire population superfluous to the needs of capital, which, as such, is a "waste" of the productive capacity of labor. At this point, one could say that this social way of "producing" oneself as human beings has to carry within itself the need for its own self-improvement. And in fact, when one follows the path of unfolding the general determinations of capital, and starts from the commodity, one finds that this mode of production entails an absolute contradiction which can only be overcome by the very disappearance of, excuse the redundancy, this mode of production. It is the contradiction between the private character of labor, which is at the basis of the existence of capital as an alienated subject of social life, and its process of socialization, which implies the very reproduction of capital as such a subject. I will try to elaborate a little more on this key point.

If the products of social labour are confronted with each other as commodities, it is because they are mutually independent products of labour, i.e., they are exercised privately and autonomously. To the right of one, because it has been carried out privately, work has no way of manifesting its social character except through the exchange of its product, that is, through its form of value. Consequently, without the private character of labor there is no value as a commodity, no substantive value as money, and no self-valorized value as capital. Now, when one looks at the development of capital as an

alienated subject with a formally unlimited movement, one finds that it is constantly advancing against this basic determination. It does so because in order to produce relative surplus value it has no other way than that of the increasing socialization of privately exercised labor, which has its manifest expression in the processes of concentration and centralization of capital.

This contradictory tendency of capital itself was pointed out by Marx in Chapter XXIV of Volume I of *Capital* when considering the tendency of capital accumulation. The question that immediately arises is: what is the limit of the socialization of private labor? That is, what happens when the last labor performed privately is fully socialized? And the obvious answer is that there is no more of this type of labor. But if there is no more private labor, there is no more form of value, and therefore no money, no capital, no working class, nor any other determination of capitalism, because what ceases exist is, in fact, this unconscious mode of organization of social life.

Now, how is this carried out? Marx uses the term "personification" to indicate the relationship between the action of individuals and the autonomous movement of commodities. And what he says is that individuals personify by their action the immanent laws of the movement of commodities. So, one discovers at the outset that this automatic movement of organization of the process of social life which is capital does not exist as something separate from the action of individuals; that one is the content and the other is the way in which that content is realized. Therefore, the question is, who is the bearer of capital's necessity to surpass itself? And the answer is obvious, because at a certain point, it is obvious that the socialization of private labor cannot be personified by any other social class than the working class, which is the one that holds in its hands the process of production and circulation of capital. As we usually present it in the CICP, this means that the working class is not the revolutionary subject because it is abstractly opposed to capital, as Marxism presents it in all its versions, but because it is the one who personifies the immanent necessity of capital to surpass itself.

We have the necessity to overcome the capitalist mode of production and the working class as the revolutionary subject of that overcoming. But, again, we are still at a level of elaboration of the determinations of our reality that is very general. And one cannot remain with this general answer because their action is much more concrete than the level of generality. It therefore becomes necessary to advance toward the concrete forms in which this contradictory tendency of capital accumulation and the action of the working class that personifies it develops. Above all, this implies starting by recognizing the global unity of capital accumulation and the consequent global character of the

working class. But, moreover, even after recognizing this unity and each national working class as a fraction of the world working class, it is necessary to identify the different fractions of the national working class as part of the same unity.

This is one of the great challenges facing the working class in this historical epoch, where the international division of labor is compounded by a strong division and polarization in the degree of complexity of jobs, making those who perform very complex work unable to recognize their identity with those who perform simpler work. and vice versa. If, for example, you ask students at university whether or not they are members of the working class, most will answer no, that they are members of a middle class, if they can see themselves as members of a class at all. In reality, students cannot recognize their own social being, not because they are stupid, but because it is the very process of capital accumulation that puts them in this situation. Therefore, one of the main challenges for the political action of the working class is to be able to transcend these appearances, to recognize its alienation in capital and the revolutionary powers that spring from this alienation.

IP: *Now, let's focus geographically on Latin America, where many concrete proposals for social and political organization are being discussed – we are referring, for example, to "buen vivir," to the peasant and indigenous movements that fight for the defense of territories, and so on – that in a certain way seek to confront capitalist relations. Is there a vision that can be based on Marx's work and that helps us understand the various forms of organization that coexist in this region?*

GC: I am not a specialist in the situation in Mexico and I do not know these movements you mention well enough to give a more or less conclusive answer. What I can give is rather a general answer from Marx's perspective, as we see it at the CICP. One of Marx's great contributions was to reveal the immanent unity that exists between economic and political relations. In particular, this is present in his development of the form taken by the buying and selling of labor power. In short, Marx finds that in order for labor power to be sold at its value, it is necessary for those who embody this commodity to organize themselves to sell it collectively, that is, to organize themselves as a social class. This is a peculiar feature of the exchange of the commodity “labor power” that stems from the fact, known to all, that this commodity is systematically in surplus. As Marx presents it, at first glance it might seem that the necessity for labor power to be sold at its full value is inherent to the working class and entirely unrelated to the needs of capital. But the

examination of cases where labor power is sold below its value shows that what may appear as a gift from heaven for individual capital in the short term is a misfortune for the totality of capital in the long term: it is the misfortune that the only part of capital capable of valorization is mutilated, atrophied, or simply perishes. Consequently, the struggle of the working class to sell its labor power is a necessity that transcends it as a class; it is a necessity of global social capital. In turn, this implies that the economic relation that constitutes the accumulation of capital can only be realized through class struggle. This is a first point that underlies the so-called social movements, whose most immediate objectives are usually their conditions of reproduction.

However, the class struggle is not exhausted in the process of buying and selling labor power. As I pointed out before, this way of producing social life is not the most powerful and fully human, which is expressed in the condition of surplus population that a large part of those who make up these social movements have. Consequently, the most radical and powerful demand of these movements is not that of the reproduction of their living conditions but that of overcoming them, which in turn involves overcoming the alienated way in which human beings reproduce themselves in this historical stage.

In short, I link this answer with the previous ones to affirm that what is at stake is to express the need for capital to surpass itself in an organization of conscious and, therefore, free social life. This is the second point that one must keep in mind when analyzing social movements that set themselves objectives of radical transformation.

But, in the end, the question one has is not linked to an abstract understanding of the reality of these movements, to their passive contemplation or to their academic appropriation. The question that must be asked is what to do, how to act politically in this reality? And if what is found is that both the struggle for the reproduction of labor power and the struggle for the overcoming of capitalism are at stake, one must ask oneself where its action is most powerful. In reality, this is the basic equation of all transformative action: what potentialities does the object I face contain with respect to my own potentialities as a transformative subject?

Now then, if one has managed to make the enormous effort that it means to recognize one's alienation in capital through the analysis of the commodity, then one has also come to affirm the political action of the working class as the bearer of the overcoming of capitalism, and specifically, one has come to accept one's own action of recognizing one's alienation as the starting point of the consciousness that carries the action to overcome capitalism; then, it becomes evident that our action is more powerful precisely where the production of the

revolutionary subjectivity of the working class is at stake. At this point, it can be said that the work done with Marx's Capital is recognizing one's own alienated subjectivity in capital as the bearer of the overcoming of capital itself, and that is a revolutionary political action.

IP: *Finally, are there any messages or comments you'd like to say to undergraduate and graduate students?*

GC: A bit of a synthesis of the above: I found in Marx an author who helped me to understand who I am, what is happening to me and, basically, to answer me about my political action. I encourage you to consider whether Marx's approach is as useful to you as it is to me.